

NATIONAL INTEGRATION SERIES



RAJA RAMMOHUN ROY

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH
AND TRAINING



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National Integration Series

RAJA RAMMOHUN ROY

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FOREWORD

THERE is a need for good supplementary reading materials for our school-going children to develop their curiosity, interests, attitudes and values. To meet this need, the National Council of Educational Research and Training is publishing literature suited to the taste and comprehension of the children of the age-group 14-17 years. In this new venture of the the Council, selected titles are being brought out for promoting in the young minds an understanding of the rich cultural heritage of our country.

In the National Integration Series our intention is to bring to young minds the stories of the men and women of India who have dedicated their lives in the service of the country and have by their thought and action contributed to the essential oneness of India.

This booklet sets out in brief the life and work of Raja Rammohun Roy. We shall consider ourselves adequately rewarded if this, and the other titles which follow, would contribute to a better appreciation of the plural society that is Bharat.

SHIB K. MITRA

Joint Director

National Council of Educational Research and Training

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Raja Rammohun Roy

INTRODUCTION

IN this wonderful universe of God, the earth has been left in darkness. Torch bearers and teachers and prophets have appeared in different periods among the various nations of the world. In India's march towards progress, Buddha and Asoka, Sankara and Ramanuja, Rammohun and Ramakrishna, Gandhi and Nehru have played their part.

The colourful life and personality of Rammohun Roy stands out distinctly among these apostles of peace and progress from which men all over the world have drawn inspiration in their lives. Tagore and Vivekananda for instance, remarkable leaders of world fame, both eminent in their various fields, yet so different in their environments, ideals, and outlook, acknowledge their indebtedness to Rammohun.

Rabindranath Tagore admits that he received the basic ideals of his life from

Rammohun. He describes the mission of his hero in the following words : “Rammohun belongs to the lineage of India’s great seers who age after age have appeared in the arena of our history with the message of the Eternal Man”.

Vivekananda pointed to three things as the dominant notes of Rammohun’s message—his acceptance of the Vedanta; his preaching of patriotism ; and the love that embraced the Mussalman equally with the Hindu. In all these he claimed that he had taken up the task that the breadth and foresight of Rammohun had mapped out.

Rammohun strove to find a reason for his religious faith, searched the scriptures, the Koran, the Vedas and the Bible, worked with spiritually minded men, co-operated with Christian missionaries and public-spirited citizens of the day for the educational, social and moral uplift of his people. Valliantly he ventured still further in the manner of the knights of old, to defend and uphold the honour of his country, in far off Britain, even at the risk of his life. He rises like the Morning Star of the new day in Indian

INTRODUCTION

History which reaches its full glory at noon-tide in Mahatma Gandhi. All honour to this brave son, this Morning Star of Modern India.

CHAPTER 1

INDIA IN TRANSITION

NEARLY one hundred years before Mohandas Gandhi was born in Kathiawar, Western India, another Mohun first saw the light of day in Radhanagar, Bengal, in Eastern India. Both grew up to be passionately religious men who gave their lives for the love of truth, justice and freedom, and in selfless service of their fellow men. Rammohun laboured for a rebirth of Indian culture and religion, while Mohandas Gandhi led his people to the promised state of Independence without violence and bloodshed.

The India which had been ruled by the Moghuls through the Middle Ages was breaking up, and it now seems that a New India dawned with the birth of Rammohun. Rammohun's life and work was to stir up the intellectual and social life of India and

thereby lay the foundations of the New Era.

The blaze of Moghul glory had died down in the second half of the eighteenth century. In the still-glowing embers of the Empire—here and there stirred to life by the British takeover—the people of India lived in poverty and misery. They groaned under heavy burdens, and as subjects of foreign rulers they lost their love of life and their zest for creative living. People in one part of the country did not know what was taking place elsewhere. Separated and ignorant, they were weak and the country fell an easy prey to adventurers, Indian and foreign.

The three main ports, Calcutta, Bombay and Madras were becoming at this time centres of power and wealth. The foreign traders—the Dutch, the French and the English—were competing with each other to acquire not only a foothold on the mainland, but also to acquire vast territories by helping Moghul rulers or supporting rival chieftans against one another. Whoever successfully played this game shared the spoils in land and money, and gained favourable terms of trade. Fortune favoured the brave, but the wind of

change was favourable to the British.

The East India Company which had been started in the 17th century with branches in Surat and Bombay in order to trade with India and the East, grew steadily in power. In the eighteenth century, under Robert Clive, it finally emerged victorious over the other foreign traders. This made the British masters of the whole country except for the princely states which one by one surrendered sovereignty to Britain.

Calcutta, the chief town of Bengal and now the headquarters of the East India Company, became more important than Delhi. There, Moghul kings who were controlled by the Company held court. Now they ruled in name only.

Meanwhile, Britain grew rich and powerful and was watched with envy by the neighbouring European lands as fabulous wealth flowed into it from the East. The British Parliament set up a Supreme Board of Control and the King of England appointed a Governor-General in Council of the Indian territories. (Calcutta remained the capital of India, Burma and Ceylon till

1912, when the Government of India moved to Delhi and made it the seat of the India-Empire.)

In those days the people of India cared little about who governed them—Rama or Ravana—the Nawab or the East India Company. The Company itself did not interfere in the day-to-day acts of the provincial chiefs of the Moghul Emperor, or that of the Maratha, Sikh or Burmese rulers. But in reality power was passing into the hands of the British Government, and basic decisions about India were being taken not even in Calcutta, but in London.

The Hindus and Muslims, Brahmins and outcasts, found no common cause of complaint against the foreigner as he seemed anxious to respect their religious views and practices and spare them from heavy taxation. The British in general, and the Company in particular, were careful not to do anything or to allow anything to be done, which would appear to be an attack on ancient social customs. This neutral position was a weak and a negative one, but was one which met with the least

resistance or opposition.

It also gave the Company the opportunity to play off one group against another, to become the judge in internal disputes and thus acquire a better position.

The main source of wealth in those days was agriculture and textiles. There was also a vast amount of gold which had come to India in earlier times and which could be taken in exchange for imported goods brought from Europe.

Thus those who owned land or had the right to collect taxes from land were rich, as were the merchants in the import or export trade—acting as Agents for the Company, of course. Parliament had given the Company a monopoly on the Indian trade.

There was no Post Office, no Railways, no Courts or Government as we know it—and therefore almost no ‘middle class’, just small shopkeepers living on the goodwill of the large merchants.

Princes and their children were assumed to know how to govern. If they didn’t, so much the worse for their subjects. Only schools for religious training existed. The

main way to 'get ahead' was by getting the favour of a prince or zamindar. A man could remain a petty clerk, or become a minor nawab—all at the whim of a prince. Rammohun's forefathers were fortunate.

CHAPTER 2

RAMMOHUN'S EARLY LIFE

RAMMOHUN'S great-grand-father, Krishna Chander Banerji, was a courtier of Siraj-ud-dowla's predecessor, and he was made *raya-raya* or *raja* for his services. The title later became shortened to 'Roy', and that has ever since remained the family name instead of 'Banerji'. Rammohun's grandfather, Brajavinod Roy, was for some time in the service of Siraj-ud-dowla, Nawab of Murshidabad. His father, Ramakant Roy, in turn, joined the Nawab's court, and rose to power and influence. A few years later he too left the path of worldly ambition to retire to his quiet country residence at Radhanagar.

The political map of India was fast changing. The life and fortunes of the people depended to a great extent on the ruling nawabs and rich nobles in various

parts of the country. Ramakanta Roy lived at Radhanagar and looked after the estates of the Raja of Burdhan as well as his own ancestral property. The year 1772 is significant in the history of India in that on the 22nd of May of that year, Rammohun Roy was born to Ramakanta and Tarini Devi. It is also significant for the Supreme Council (in India) of the East India Company and a Supreme Court were established in that year.

The five-member Council and the Court were answerable to Parliament. The Governor-General, therefore, ruled India 'in Council', while the Court settled land and tax disputes in the areas held by the Company.

Rammohun's mother was a forceful personality with firm beliefs and clear views. She came of a family of priests that lived near Srirampur (Serampore), a Danish settlement. Her parents were devoted to Kali worship of the Sakti cult. The strict observance of rituals and numerous ceremonies which Rammohun's mother insisted on had a great effect on her

children. So impressed was Rammohun by his mother's religious fervour that he would not even drink water without first reciting the formula from the Vaishnavite sacred text, the *Bhagavatha Purana*. Brought up in Hindu orthodoxy and piety, as a boy Rammohun went through every religious form most carefully.

While he was still in school, the *Veda Patasala*, reading and memorising the scriptures in Sanskrit, his first marriage took place. He was hardly eight years of age. In a society where there was insecurity and uncertainty, famine and sickness and other factors, early marriages were the order of the day in most Hindu families. This custom was more common in the Brahmin community. Rammohun's child bride died within a year. Not long after, another marriage was arranged by his elders. It is possible that the boy did not even know what was taking place ! But when Rammohun grew up, he married again, "possibly as late as 1799". Years later he disapproved of men taking two or more wives and became a champion of the rights

of women and strongly supported the practice of having only one wife.

Meanwhile, at home, his education continued according to the pattern laid down by religious tradition, which was closely observed among the upper classes of society. The *guru*, whose main function was to be a spiritual guide, taught Rammohun the three R's : reading, writing and arithmetic. The boy also learnt Persian from a Muslim priest or *moulvi*. In the days of his grandfather who was in Moghul service, knowledge of Persian was a necessary qualification, and the practice was kept up.

Unusually quick and clever in languages, Rammohun's progress was very rapid. His Arabic and Persian tutor encouraged him to work hard at poetry and the elements of Euclid's geometry. He learned by heart several verses of the Sufi poets. He had soon mastered classical Sanskrit, Persian, Bengali and Arabic—no mean record for a lad barely in his early teens. About this time he came into contact with the Koran. The simple and challenging creed of Islam, with little or no ritual and without any

image worship, presented a striking contrast to his own orthodox Hindu upbringing.

His attainments more than pleased his mother. She persuaded him to go on to Varanasi --the abode of Heavenly Bliss, the Holy City of the Hindus and the centre famous for Sanskrit scholarship. Perhaps she also had been ill at ease while Rammohun, under Muslim tutors, was exposed to a faith and mode of living so different to their own. Now she hoped that under the learned *pandits* in Varanasi, her son would become a great scholar or *sastri* and possibly a great teacher and leader of men. Kashi was a place of pilgrimage. People from all over India came here to pray and to wash away their sins by plunging into the healing waters of the holi Ganga. Coming from the priestly class, Rammohun's mother hoped that her son would shine as a prince among priests and a prophet and preacher of Puranic lore.

At the Vedic Academy in Varanasi, Rammohun undertook the study of the Shastras, the Hindu Philosophy and Religion. He pored over the texts and soon

was able to quote the scriptures with ease to support his own views or standpoints. He was fully aware of the different meanings of words, and how the Devil could also use the scriptures to suit his purpose. His keen and questioning mind looked for texts which would point to the one Absolute Brahma—the True God—in place of the many gods of idol worship.

Eagerly he took hold of a simple faith, based on reason and acceptable to men of all races and free from the numberless ceremonies and elaborate practices so common then. He felt a deep yearning for better things and was inspired by the vision of a purer faith. Had not Emperor Akbar groped after a “religion of Gods”, a religion founded on the best of Islam and Hinduism? Other reformers, Nanak and Kabir had experienced the same longing. Young Rammohun’s scholastic training vaguely stirred within him a thirst for the One True God. His unending search for a religious principle underlying all creeds had begun.

CHAPTER 3

RAMMOHUN IN CALCUTTA

LEAN, lanky, lonely and forlorn, with the growth of soft downy beard on his chin, Rammohun turned homewards at seventeen, his formal education completed. His views on Hindu practices disturbed his parents and his broad-minded beliefs upset his relatives. In one of his essays, he called in question the worship of idols. He did not approve of the pattern of Hindu family life. His father, the head of the family, reminded him that he was too young to understand the time-honoured practices and ceremonies of the people, which formed the culture of the Aryan race. It would not do for a member of his family to cast a slur on these ancient customs. It pained him to see his son's impatience, doubts and non-belief. Soon, as Rammohun tells us, his ways and thoughts so enraged his father that it

became impossible for him to stay at home. When he left home it was feared that Rammohun might give up the world and become a *sadhu*.

The young Rammohun set out in search of Truth. The pilgrim path took him to Mount Kailas, on the other side of the Himalayas. He then joined some pilgrims bound for Tibet, the land of the Lamas. During the three odd years that he remained there, he closely observed the religious life of Buddha's followers. When the Head of the Lamas heard that Rammohun questioned the claim that the Dalai Lama was god, he ordered the young man out of the country. It was fortunate that by this time Rammohun's father was longing to see his son and anxious to take him back. After three years of travel, when he was twenty years old, Rammohun was welcomed back with open arms. But that was for a very short while. His ways and views were still not acceptable to his people. When he came of age, Rammohun was on the lookout for ways and means of earning his own livelihood. He was impatient to begin his

life's work.

Ramakant Roy moved from Radhanagar to another village. He added land to land and became one of the wealthy land owners of the district. The system of land ownership introduced by the East India Company required that a fixed tax be paid each year (it was called the Permanent Settlement). Naturally, those with small plots could not pay the tax in bad years and would go into debt. Soon they would have to sell the land. Thus the poor peasants could not retain their land, while the rich gained more and more. Riding on the wave of prosperity, Ramakant Roy managed to buy houses and take farms and estates on lease. There was enough work for all his children and Rammohun became familiar with the management of landed property. Jagmohan, his elder brother, was now a *zamindar* (a big land owner) in his own right, and he too assisted his father in running the large estate.

It is not surprising that Rammohun, eager, although youthful, should turn his thoughts to Calcutta, the chief city of

Bengal, which was fast becoming the chief centre of the British Empire. The British were beginning to control the money market, shares, banking, and the buying and selling of goods. Any contact with an English firm or agency would prove profitable in time. For a man so gifted and energetic as Rammohun was, there was many a golden opportunity in Calcutta to make a fortune. So that is where he went after he left his father's house.

In Calcutta, Rammohun became a partner in a money-lending business, and appointed Golaknarayan Sarkar as his clerk and assistant. Later, in the court cases in which he was involved, it becomes clear that he had lent large sums of money to "distinguished officers of the East India Company" at about this period of his life. Also, he was employed in the business of "dealing in the Company's papers".

His wealth and power grew because of the way he used to advantage his admirable fluency in quoting from Koran and the Vedas, and his knowledge of Persian and Bengali speech and writing. In 1799 he

purchased, in his own name, two *taluks*, Govindpur and Rameshwarpur, situated in Burdwan district, now in West Bengal, which henceforth gave him a steady income of Rs. 5,000 annually. A few months after buying this property, Rammohun left Calcutta for Patna, Varanasi and other places, leaving the management of his newly purchased estate to his friend, Rajiblochan Roy, an influential *zamindar* of Burdwan. An agreement was made to the effect that in case he died while on his travels, his nephew, Gurdas Mukherji would inherit the *taluks*. At that time Rammohun had no children. His eldest son, Radhaprasad, was born in July 1800, six months after this agreement was signed.

To crown all the advantages of his wealth and social standing, culture, travels, tastes and talents, Rammohun now decided to learn the language of the new rulers—English. This would open the door to modern thought and science. Living in Calcutta, a cosmopolitan city, it was easier to learn the foreign tongue. Yet, because his father's fortunes crashed suddenly and his

father and brother became penniless and were thrown into a debtor's prison, Rammohun now had many other things to worry about and could not make much progress at that time. Still, by 1801, he could speak English well enough to be understood.

Strangely, Rammohun was not affected by the fearful ruin that over-took his family, for he had taken care to protect most of his property beforehand. Death overtook his father in 1803. This news reached Rammohun too late to enable him to be present at the death-bed, or to attend the funeral. It was a serious blow to him. After the official period of mourning, Rammohun went back to his business. The time was just right for him to expand his business and he threw himself heart and soul into money-making. He had a natural genius for amassing wealth, and his energy was equal to his native gift.

His affairs prospered. His money-lending business increased. Some of the servants of the East India Company who were among his debtors, became his friends.

From these closer contacts, Rammohun began to sense that the British were now, more than ever before, willing to bring peace and good administration to India, and he too strongly desired to co-operate in this grand undertaking to make his people great. He began to indulge in many public activities, urging the government to institute and the people to accept changes in the rigid and backward society of the day. Maybe that was why he later wanted to visit Britain and influence Parliament and the King to bring about reforms which would achieve progress and freedom for the people he so dearly loved. His friends in the East India Company supported him in these activities. Between him and John Digby in particular, there grew a friendship which proved most valuable later in introducing Rammohun's writings to English readers abroad.

CHAPTER 4

IN THE COMPANY'S SERVICE

WHEN he was about thirty years old, Rammohun served for a short time as head clerk in the Collectorate under Mr. John Digby, the Collector at Rangpur. He was subsequently nominated to the post of *Diwan*, "the principal native officer in the collection of revenue". This was a position of considerable influence and authority, although the salary was small. During his stay at Rangpur, Rammohun carried on religious controversies with the *pandits*, wrote tracts in Persian, translated portions of the Vedanta, studied the Tantras and made a study of the Kalpa Sutras and other Jaina scriptures. Thus it was a time of strenuous preparation for his future work. Besides these, he used to hold vigorous religious discussions every evening at his residence, in which he used all the weapons

of his armoury in exposing the absurdities of idolatry. At this time, he was also engaged in writing a treatise in Persian, entitled, "A Gift To The Monotheists". We know little of what effect this "Gift" had on the readers—Hindu and Muslim. But it shows how his reformer's mind had begun to work and gives a foretaste of his zeal, his life's mission which made him the pioneer of religious reform at the dawn of the 19th century.

The "Gift" urges both Muslims and Hindus to turn away from their different paths and practices to the underlying basic truth and belief in the One Being, the Source of All that is. This has been a deep, if unexpressed, longing in the heart of man since the beginning of creation. But for an Indian of that day to suggest a way to bring about the harmony of religions was not only new but extraordinarily bold and far ahead of his times.

Rammohun explained that man's duty was to serve his fellow men. He declared that he had met, discussed and lived with men of widely differing creeds and ideas of

God, but that their heart's longing was just the same. Man's heart craved for God who was still Unknown. And the search for Him was one that man could not give up. On the other hand, he felt that most religions were preached by fanatics, with promises of rewards and honours, most of which were fanciful or false. So he called on every one with a sound mind and reason "to make enquiries, as to the truth of his adopted creed".

This first attempt of a young man expresses views which are not those of a mature person, and yet are not wholly unsound. He could have been more guarded in his statements. To say that most of the things taught in religion were nonsensical and absurd is too strong. No doubt he was aware of the danger he stood in. He knew he would make men angry by attacking established forms, the outward appearance and practices, which normally people did not question or criticise. It called for no small amount of courage to speak or write in this manner.

Rammohun quarrelled with those who

believed “that their own particular faith is the *only* way to salvation”. To him religion reflected “the needs of particular societies in which men are organised”. Codes of conduct grow from the circumstances of the society. He sought to bring back into the lives of the people the purity of the Hindu faith as taught in the Vedas. He wanted all unnecessary rituals and outward forms to be given up. At the same time he was eager not to offend his own community, the Brahmins, by his writings. So with the help of a few friends, he started the Society of the Spirit—the *Atmiya Sabha*—for the worship of the Unseen God of the Vedas.

A year later he published a work on the Vedanta in Bengali, and translations of the Upanishads and other Hindu Scriptures “to point out the Unity of the Godhead”. This was his method “to put down idol-worship and purify the ancient religion of his people”.

Rammohun’s fortunes rose while he worked under John Digby. The senior merchant official treated him as an equal, though he was just a clerk. Digby

recognised the high gifts of his Indian subordinate. They became good friends. While the Englishman developed a better understanding of Indian culture, the Indian used this opportunity to improve his English. Digby arranged for the publication of Rammohun's abridged version of Vedanta in England, which was greatly appreciated by English readers. This contact with the West was most valuable. It paved the way to fame and greatness. For, later, when Max Muller read Rammohun's writings, he was so taken up by the Hindu Shastras, that he mastered Sanskrit and hailed Rammohun as one of the greatest thinkers and religious reformers of all times.

In passing it may be pointed out that during this period, Rammohun's understanding had broadened and his mind showed marked improvement and development. From being a mere critic of the rites and ceremonies, of idols and many gods, he now showed a definite trend to follow the Hindu scriptures which pointed to the oneness of God. "I do no more than

assert that if correct reasoning and the dictates of commonsense induce the belief of a wise, uncreated Being, the Supporter and Ruler of the boundless universe, we should also consider him the most powerful and supreme existence, for surpassing our powers of comprehension or description.”*

Rammohun was filled with a desire to awaken his countrymen from their dream of error, and help them to get acquainted with their scriptures—to “enable them to contemplate with true devotion the Unity and Omnipresence of Nature’s God”.

When a permanent post fell vacant, Digby appointed Rammohun as *Dewan* of Rangpur, and waited for the Board of Revenue to confirm the appointment. But they refused to confirm it and directed Digby to appoint a Muslim instead. So the official career of Rammohun was short-lived. This was because a few years before Rammohun had unwittingly offended some English official and that incident had been noted against him.

When seen at this distance of time, from the country’s standpoint, it was a piece

of good fortune that Rammohun was not confirmed as an officer of the Company. Full many a gem of purest ray serene (many Rammohuns), the dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear (lost in a Merchant Company or in Government service), and waste their sweetness on the desert air ! A prophet of religious reforms, the forerunner of a New Age in India, dealing with dusty records and revenue cases ! What a tragic loss that would have been !

CHAPTER 5

LIFE IN CALCUTTA

WHEN Digby left India, taking Rammohun's manuscripts to England for publication, Rammohun gave up his post at Rangpur and returned to Calcutta. It was now that the tide of his affairs led him on to greater things than service in the East India Company. It was good that he turned in another direction where his mental powers could be fully exercised and his several activities in association with kindred spirits could prove fruitful. Many friends met at his house for group study and discussion and worship. This caused his opponents to organise themselves to work against him. While his enemies were thus employed, fresh support came to him from Marwari business men of the Jain community living in Calcutta. What could be more natural than that their interest and

business instinct should lead them to a man steadily growing in wealth and power and learning !

Rammohun's city residence became the base and centre of his many-sided activities. He was now in the prime of life, well established and wealthy. He had gained a mastery over the English language, thanks to the friendship of Digby. An English visitor to Calcutta wrote in 1824 to the Calcutta Journal : "I was introduced to Rammohun in 1818 and was surprised at the unparalleled accuracy of his language, never before having heard any foreigner of Asiatic birth speak so well, and esteeming his fine choice of words as worthy the imitation of even Englishmen...I was delighted and surprised at his perfection in this tongue."

Not only was his spoken English good, but his written English was equally so. In a letter to Rammohun, Jeremy Bentham, the celebrated English philosopher wrote, "Your works are made known to me by a book in which I read a style which, but for the name of a Hindu, I should certainly

have ascribed to the pen of a superiorly educated and instructed Englishman.”

Calcutta was at this time the seat of the greatest empire in the East. It was no longer a static medieval world in which Rammohun lived, “hiding its treasures and secrets”. The Hindus had for centuries been accustomed to living under foreign rule. The British Era meant for them a change of masters and, all things considered, not a bad change. The Muslim upperclasses, on the other hand, who had been used to living on the generosity of the Moghul courts, found their source of funds drying up. There was no more a place for a mere “gentleman”. The clerk or merchant progressed, while he who clung to patterns of the now dead Moghul Empire remained isolated and backward. The city Hindus, versatile and swift, began to react to the new economic possibilities mainly in Government service. Lured by the new opportunities they showed a craving for the wine of new language. In contrast to this learning of new ideas and customs, of changes in the world, the orthodox Hindu

society presented a dark picture.

The Bengali middle classes had been exposed to the broadening influence of the West. They were ready to rally round a leader with a vision of a New India. Rammohun fulfilled that need admirably. He lived in a modern accessible house, fitted in the western style. It was here that the Spiritual Society or the *Atmiya Sabha* was born in 1815. Those interested in his ideas, which included "some of the wealthiest, and most influential families of Bengal" soon gathered round Rammohun. His chief supporter was Dwarkanath Tagore, the grand-father of Dr. Rabindranath of world literary fame. There were Mitras, Banerjis, Mukerjis, Mullicks and Boses galore who attended the meetings, some regularly, others only occasionally. Rammohun was like the Dean of a College of surgeons, called upon to deal with the sickness in a society whose many ills and sorrows cried out aloud for a radical cure.

There was a sense of brotherhood, a closeness of spirit in the *Atmiya Sabha*. Even foreigners were welcome, although it

was a Hindu “church”. David Hare, of an English firm of Watch dealers, was a warm supporter of Rammohun in all his plans for social welfare. The members of the *Atmiya Sabha* listened to recitals of mantras by Sanskrit scholars, to texts carefully chosen for the idea of One God, and to devotional songs composed by Rammohun and his friends. Rammohun was strict about not allowing pictures or idols. He refused to allow any explanation for idolatry. As he expressed it, “The Hindus...firmly believe in the real existence of innumerable gods and goddesses, who possess, in their own departments, full and independent power, and to propitiate them, and not the true God, are temples erected and ceremonies performed.”

On one occasion, a very lively debate took place between a noted Madras *pandit* of the Vedas, Shree Subramania Sastri, and Rammohun Roy on the subject of idol worship, in the presence of the leading citizens of Calcutta. Rammohun’s great skill and force of reasoning, his vast learning and eloquence, carried the day.

The work of writing and publishing various papers and tracts in different languages moved on — writings designed to win the people over to the teaching of the One True God of the Vedas. Rammohun's comments and views were put forward so effectively that the Hindu society was lashed into fury. Many scholars in other parts of India and in Europe were interested in these studies. Others were enraged, and some openly abused him as a quack, a humbug, the arch-enemy of Hinduism.

His shorter *Vedanta*, and a chapter of the *Sama Veda*, and one of the chapters of the *Yajur Veda* in English were printed and distributed free of cost. This was a real service, involving much hard work and personal sacrifice, but it acted like a red rag to the bull. How dare he let the vulgar eyes of *sudras* and non-Hindus read and handle the sacred *Shastras* ? Was not that the sole privilege of the twice born (Brahmins) ?

Moreover, Rammohun declared in the Preface "I have forsaken idolatry for the worship of the One True God. In order,

therefore, to vindicate my faith and that of our early forefathers, I have been endeavouring, for some time past, to convince my countrymen of the true meaning of the sacred books." He felt that believers should not be kept in ignorance, and that the source of authority should be made known to all. Also, he desired that the West should know that the evil practices in Indian society had no basis in the scriptures, and that the pure Hindu thought had universal application. To his English readers, he said that all his efforts were inspired by one purpose "that was to make men happy and comfortable both here and hereafter".

In the midst of such bitter enmity, he patiently bore all the mud slinging and shame heaped upon him, and never lost his faith in the ultimate triumph of his cause. "Whatever men may say, I cannot be deprived of this consolation that my motives are acceptable to the Being Who beholds in secret and compensates openly." But when any of his statements were doubted or questioned he took the trouble

of taking them up point by point and trying to convince the unbelievers.

“For the chief part, the theory and practice of Hinduism, I am sorry to say, is made to consist in the adoption of a peculiar mode of diet, the least aberration from which (even though the conduct of the offender may be in other respects pure and blameless) is not only visited with the severest censure, but actually punished by expulsion from the society of his family and friends. In a word he is doomed to undergo what is commonly called loss of caste...

“On the contrary, the rigid observance of this grand article of Hindu faith is considered in so high a light as to compensate for every moral defect. Even the most terrible crimes weigh little or nothing in the balance against the supposed guilt of its violation. Murder, theft or perjury, though brought home to the party by a judicial sentence, so far from inducing loss of caste, are visited in their society with no peculiar mark of infamy or disgrace.” He wanted to place in their

proper places these minor customs which had been magnified out of all proportion.

Rammohun started with the Koran, specialised in the Vedas, and went further to study the Christian scriptures. A keen student of comparative religions, he began to use verses from the Bible in his arguments and in his appeals to the people. “Most earnestly do I pray that the whole (of the Scripture) may, sooner or later, prove efficient in producing on the minds of the Hindus in general, a conviction of the rationality of believing in and adoring the Supreme Being only : together with a complete perception and practice of that grand and comprehensive moral principle : Do unto others as you would be done by.”

CHAPTER 6

HIS REACTION TO CHRISTIANITY

IN his great mission Rammohun was fortunate in having as friends Europeans and Christian missionaries of the time. The Baptist Mission had started work in Serampore, William Carey, Marshman and Ward, the famous trio, lived and worked together for the Mission in Bengal. Carey was a humble shoe-maker of Nottingham who landed in Calcutta in 1794. It is said that while he cobbled he studied, and learnt Latin, Greek and Hebrew in an elementary form. He worked hard, trying to learn Bengali and Sanskrit and translated parts of the Bible for the spread of the Christian Gospel among the educated Hindus. Rammohun's treatise, tracts, and translations and literary activities on one side and Carey's translations and literary activities on the other, contributed much

towards a revival and a rebirth of Bengali literature. The awakening of the Hindus also was the result of the joint efforts of Rammohun and the Protestant Missions.

The missionaries of Serampore were naturally excited about the work of the Hindu thinker and writer who had stirred the conscience of the public in a way no one else had succeeded in doing until then.

Rammohun was glad to meet a young missionary. William Yates, whose diary has the entry :—25th October, 1815. “I visited a learned Brahmin. He understands something of Latin, Greek, and Mathematics ; he also speaks English fluently.” A few weeks later, Rammohun visited Serampore, where the missionaries lived. Carey received him and showed him the printing press and other branches of their work. There was hymn singing and family prayers, after which the guest left. Both were pleased.

The missionaries hoped very much that the visitor who admired Jesus Christ and studied the Bible would join them as a member of the Church. But they were

disappointed when he would not commit himself irrevocably by being converted to Christianity. Rammohun could not appreciate the desire of the missionaries to baptise and enrol members to a closed fellowship. He praised the lofty moral standards and the noble teaching contained in the Sermon on the Mount, but would not accept the idea of an organised church. Further, he was unhappy that the Christian missionaries offended the Hindus by threatening them, if they refused to be converted, by "miserable stuff...pages filled with hell fire, and still hotter fire", demanding removal of caste marks and similar things which to him were irrelevant. The British Government soon became suspicious of the activities of the mission. They were not anxious to use the Christian religion as a means for strengthening the Empire.

Missionary journals in the British Isles, Europe, Australia and America took notice of Rammohun's work. They spoke of the possibility of his conversion to Christianity. A man so well read in the New Testament,

who had taken pains to study Hebrew and Greek that he might understand the Gospels for himself without the aid of an interpreter, would be a source of great strength if he were on their side. People in France and Germany were also interested in his writings and views. Long before every one in Calcutta had heard of him, he had come to acquire an international reputation as a man of learning and as a religious and social reformer.

His fame abroad raised his prestige in the eyes of his countrymen. People applauded the man so well spoken of and highly appreciated in the West. Some of the liberal minded European businessmen were glad to be on his side. Their letters, published and private, gained for Rammohun still more respect and record in India and elsewhere. As a traveller (Fitzclarence, later Earl) wrote : “I think he is in many respects an extraordinary person...At Calcutta he associates with the English. He is, however, cut off from all familiar and domestic intercourse with them.” This sincere praise from so many

Westerners roused in his heart a desire to visit Europe at the earliest opportunity, although he could not fulfil this wish for some years to come.

His star was rising but there were serious difficulties on the domestic front. Law-suits and family disputes vexed him much. It is not easy to speak of the nature of the law suits. Some have thought that even his mother may have sued him in a court of law. But it is certain that his nephew brought cases against him but later withdrew them and begged his forgiveness. There was an attempt to make him pay his father's debts. Why else did he defend himself in the court in 1823 that he had separated from his father during the latter's lifetime, that the property he owned had been acquired by his own efforts, and that he had not inherited any portion of his father's debts for that reason. The Court upheld his contention and dismissed the suits.

There is a story that his family was subjected to persecution on the grounds that he was not a Hindu and his ways of living

were not in accordance with the Hindu faith. His enemies abused his wives who were living with their mother-in-law in the village. Frightful cries of owls and crows were heard at night, cow-dung and refuse were thrown into the house, with the intention of frightening the residents and causing them to take to flight. Was not Rammohun a disgrace and a scandal to the Hindu society, keeping company with Muslims and *pharanghees* ? His mother, who did not approve of his views or conduct, demanded that the daughters-in-law should leave her house. Even the villagers were divided in their loyalties. In any case, his family needed protection, and so he moved them to another village. The house he owned there had been built with bricks inscribed with the sacred letters 'Om' to prove that he was a pious Brahmin ! Rammohun tells us that he had to defend himself at enormous expense against a series of legal proceedings. He baffled the efforts of his enemies and proved in the courts of justice that he had not forfeited his rights as a Brahmin.

It is tragic that mother and son should have broken off filial relations over questions of religion and property. It is difficult to decide which of the two caused the heart-break — he or his mother. Probably both. His mother felt that Rammohun has abandoned his religion. The rift occurred precisely at the time when Rammohun published his famous book, “The Precepts of Jesus”. His mother could not understand that it was but proper that a Sanskrit scholar like him should, after the study of Islam, Buddhism and Jainism, turn his attention to the New Testament which contained the teachings of Christ and embodied the idea of the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of Man.

The publication of this outstanding book with the novel title, “The Precepts of Jesus—The Guide to Peace and Happiness” startled his friends and enemies alike. In the face of strong national feeling against the influence of Christianity, he introduced the Precepts of Jesus, as “admirably calculated to elevate men’s ideas to high and liberal notions of One

God...and also to regulate the conduct of the human race in the discharge of their duties to God, to themselves, and to society”.

While this event may have been sensational among his countrymen, opposition came from the least expected side. His missionary friends in Serampore were shocked that the word of God, so sacred to the Christians, should be handled or used to suit one's purpose by a non Christian. They charged Rammohun with ignorance and unbelief, and called him a 'heathen', a term most offensive in this land of religions. Rammohun thought this was the unkindest cut of all. The missionaries held that to deal with a part of the Gospel and to leave out others—the miracles and deeds of mercy, the person and character of the Lord Jesus, His life and death and His coming to life again, could not be done without damaging the whole.

It would not do to present Jesus as a Prophet alone, they felt. For, to them, above all, He was the Divine Word—God Himself. The missionaries could have

been more charitable and less severe, seeing that Rammohun's intention was to create harmony and not strife. In their intolerance they refused to see the possibility of an outsider being carried away by the moral teachings of Christ, but perhaps even repelled by the organized Christian church. They did not know how much Rammohun valued and cherished the moral teachings of Christ. "I have found the doctrines of Christ more conducive to moral principles, and better adapted for the use of rational beings, than any other which have come to my knowledge". This is a bold statement showing great courage of conviction. Max Muller, the great Sanskrit scholar and one of Rammohun's admirers, writes, "Then was the time when Christianity might have stepped forth in its strong armour and gained the greatest victories in India. Rammohun and his friends were ready."

Rammohun was looking at things from a different standpoint. He was not making an orderly or methodical arrangement of the truths of the Christian religion. He sought only to collect some of the valuable truths

that would help improve the conduct of the people. His hope was that his effort would be crowned by the same success as Guru Nanak's and "that his 'church' would include not only the believers in the Vedas and the Koran but those in the Bible also." Some of his fellow men feared that he had now identified himself with the foreigners and was lost to Hinduism,

It must have been a great sorrow to him that his Christian friends broke away from him. Had they looked upon him as a pilgrim, a seeker after truth instead of a lost soul, it would have been well for both. The missionaries were too eager to convert him. His reply in writing to their criticism was an "Appeal to the Christian Public". In this he referred to the religious wars of Europe among Christian nations and the existence of many sects and divisions in the church in the west. He pointed out that his method of promoting Christianity in India was likely to be more successful than those of the missionaries.

Marshman replied that "the New Testament story has to be accepted as a

whole or not at all.” Next, Rammohun sent his “Second Appeal to the Christian Public” in which he refused to accept the doctrine of the Trinity and the Incarnation. He issued a third and final Appeal of “nearly 400 pages of well-documented and closely reasoned prose”. However, in the end, the missionaries and he parted company.

CHAPTER 7

THE DEFENDER OF TRUTH

ONE of the Baptist missionaries, the Rev. William Adams was helping Rammohun to translate the New Testament into Bengali. In a translation programme there are often disagreements about how a word or idea should be presented in another language. In this case, however, the disagreements were not between Rammohun and Rev. Adams but between Rev. Adams and the other missionaries ! In time, Adams left the mission and joined Rammohun in his stand against the other missionaries. A small number of Unitarians, (believers in the oneness of God) came together and the Calcutta Unitarian Committee was formed. It included a number of government officials and Indians. Adams acted as the Secretary. The committee attempted to reform the religion of Christ which they felt had been

corrupted by professional theologians.

The Unitarian Society did not continue long in India. But the Unitarians in England and America were eager to follow up the matter further and find out how the cause of Christianity could be advanced in India. They desired to assist Rammohun to present Christ in a way that would be acceptable to India. To a gentleman in Baltimore in the U.S.A., Rammohun wrote in this connection, "I have every reason to hope that the truths of Christianity will not be much longer kept hidden under the evil of heathen doctrines and practices, gradually introduced among the followers of Christ, since many lovers of truth are zealously engaged in rendering the religion of Jesus free from corruptions...It is a great satisfaction to my conscience to find that that doctrines inculcated by Jesus and His apostles are quite different from those human inventions...I am, therefore, anxious to support them even at the risk of my own life. I rely much on the force of truth, which will, I am sure, ultimately prevail. Our number is comparatively small but I

am glad to inform you that one of them can be justly charged with want of zeal and prudence.

“I wish to add, in order that you may set me right, if you find me mistaken,—my view of Christianity is that in representing all mankind as children of one Eternal Father, it enjoins them to love one another, without making any distinction of caste, colour, creed or country.”

When severely criticised by Dr. Tytler of Bengal, for his incorrect attitude towards Christianity, he dealt with him in his own way. Under the assumed name of Ram Das, and replying as though he were an orthodox Hindu, he said that he and Dr. Tytler should join together against “The abominable notion of a single God” advocated by Rammohun and others, arguing that the Christian and Hindu faiths rested on the common basis, the manifestation of God in the flesh, and drew a parallel between the incarnation of Ram and Christ...This annoyed Dr. Tytler still more and he called “Ram Das”, “The wretched tool of the damnable heresy of

Unitarianism", which was the same as Hindu idolatry and like it proceeded from the devil!

While Rammohun was engaged in his campaign against Christian missionaries, he had to face opposition from an entirely different quarter. A defender of the orthodox Hindu faith who styled himself an 'Establisher of Religion', brought out a Bengali tract called 'Four Questions', which was levelled against the reformer and his associates, Hindu and Christian. Rammohun's reply in the same language was entitled, 'Answers to Four Questions'. Although he mentions no names, it is thought that he knew who this person was, from the number of personal references in the answers. The First Question : "Had the reformers put themselves outside the pale of Hinduism ? Were they not to be boycotted as deserters?" In reply Rammohun challenged the Defender to practise one millionth of what the Hindu religion required him to observe. Had he, his father, and his grandfather not used Mohammedan tooth powder and

perfumes and studied Mohammedan lore under Mohammedan teachers and instructed men of an alien faith in their own *Shastras* ? These things were as much a violation of strict Hindu law as any ritual offence charged to Rammohun.

The Second Question asks whether the religion of those who oppose native manners and customs, who ignorantly claim to know God, and who wear the sacred thread of the Brahmin without affection, is not as the religion of the tiger and the cat. The reply was made by enquiring whether the 'establisher' observes the native customs of the Vaisnavas who eat no fish. Does he follow all the usages of his own sect ? If not, does he perform the required penances ? Rammohun drew an effective contrast between the man who outwardly appears to fulfill the strictest prescriptions of his religion, but at home, eats fish and abuses everyone ; and the man who makes no pretence but holds to the saying of *Meha Nirvan* : "The Eternal religion consists in the Knowledge of God and the performance of those practices most beneficial to man."

The Third Question asks what religion sanctions the taking of life by a Brahmin, and scornfully enquires as to the fate in this and in the next world of “merciful searchers into knowledge” who daily cause goats to be eaten at their table. The answer says that according to the *Shastras* “it is not a sin to eat flesh that has been offered to gods and to ancestors”. But does the eating of animal food bring down the punishment of hell, does not the ‘establisher’ himself eat fish ?

The Fourth Question asks what must be done with “certain well-known persons” who throw off fear of religion and of public opinion, cut their hair, drink wine and consort with infidels ? In answer Rammohun stated that the *Shastras* forbade only “vain cutting of the hair” and allowed the drinking of the sacred wine. These replies resulted in a rejoinder of more than 200 pages from the ‘Establisher of Religion’. To this “tirade of abuse”, of the ‘Destroyer of religion’, as Rammohun now called him, Rammohun declined to reply saying that in giving medicine to boys that are sick, the

physician does not lose his temper over their kicks and screams. His medicine was the giving of answers by quoting from the *Shastras* and removing some of their false interpretations.

Rammohun was still busy with his work of bringing to the knowledge of his people the real truths of Christianity. When a Christian minister in the U.S.A. asked Rammohun in 1824 for his views on the conversion of Indians to Christianity the great thinker replied, "That is one question...which I pause to answer, as I am led to believe, from reason, what is set forth in the Scripture, that 'in every nation that *feareth* God and worketh *righteousness* is accepted with him' in whatever form of worship he may have been taught to glorify God. Nevertheless I presume to think that Christianity, if properly inculcated, has a greater tendency to improve the moral, social and political state of mankind than any other known religious system."

With his help Christian societies and groups made careful enquiry into the motives of conversions, and a study of

methods of spreading the Gospel.

Rammohun advised these societies not to expect any spectacular results from “public preaching of European learning and science and Christian morality”....Some in Europe and England felt that Rammohun’s own work was more beneficial and exerted more Christian influence than the work of missionaries themselves!

Rammohun’s magazines *Brahman Sevadhi* and the *Brahmanical Magazine* in which he replied to the frequent attacks of the missionaries, are a proof of his skill in debate and his knowledge in religious matters and of world history.

These magazines were dubbed by the missionaries as “abounding in misrepresentations of the motives of those whom they attack”, but at the same time hailing their appearance in the hope that they would probably help to cherish that spirit of enquiry and investigation, which had hitherto been so foreign to the Hindu character. Rammohun’s appeal to the missionaries to use sober and moderate language in religious debates seems to have

been in vain, for they once again condemned in harsh language “the *Vedanta* system of religion”.

His writings and tracts led to much correspondence with western scholars and brought him into the limelight. Although he admitted that Christianity had advantages over other religions, he did not give active support to missionaries, except in their educational activities.

CHAPTER 8

THE ABOLITION OF SUTTEE

THE scarifice of widows on the death of their husbands was an inhuman and superstitious practice which Rammohun set himself to stop through an enactment of law. In 1811 he had been horrified when the widow of his brother ascended the funeral pyre. He had tried hard to stop her, but had failed. When, however, she actually felt the flames on her person, she made an attempt to get up and escape. But the orthodox relations, thinking such an escape would be a great sin and would bring dishonour to them, pinned the poor woman down to the pyre by means of bamboo poles, while drums were beaten loudly to drown her frantic shrieks.

Rammohun, a witness to this awful scene, and unable to help her out of such a tragic end, was stricken with pity and

remorse. He there and then took a vow that he would never rest till the inhuman practice of *suttee* was abolished. When he was older, he carried on agitation for many years before the tide of public feeling turned, and on the 4th of Dec. 1829, Lord William Bentinck issued a Regulation abolishing *suttee* throughout all the territories subject to Fort William.

It was his greatest triumph, this purging of his country of that supreme shame. In the history of India his name will be linked for all time with this achievement. The fearful custom had held the country in its grasp until 1830. In one year, 463 widows were burned in Bengal alone. In 1818, the number was 839. In Calcutta, in the shadow of British law courts and with the unspoken permission of the British Governor-General, widows were burned every year by the hundred, even young girls under twenty years of age. They mounted the pyre, "with vermillion on their foreheads, as brides adorned for their lords."

In 1814, Carey collected the facts

regarding the practice and presented them to the Governor-General for action.

Rammohun published his first tract on this rite in 1818, and campaigned against it continuously through pamphlets and by persuasion among influential citizens and officials. Credit must go to Lord William Bentinck who saw that this ancient custom was no part of religion, and should be given up. When this national blot was removed in 1829 (but only in British territories, of course) Rammohun wrote, "Heaven has rescued our weaker sex from cruel murder under the cloak of religion, and our, character, as a people, from the contempt with which it had been regarded on account of this custom by all the civilized nations on the face of the world."

Among the tracts and papers published in England by Rammohun is found one, with the title, "Some remarks in vindication of the Resolution passed by the Government of Bengal in 1829 abolishing the practice of female sacrifices in India." He gave one copy of this to Sir Alexander Johnstone, President of the Royal Asiatic Society, and

another to Lady Johnstone, on behalf of the females of India, as an appeal to the female community of England, saying that although the former had not had an equal opportunity of mental improvement, they were nevertheless happily acknowledged to be partakers of the nature and capacity of that blessed sex.

The Appendix to this tract read :

“I cannot, I think, be irrelevant to the subject, to bring under the notice of the British public, that the abolition of the practice of burning Hindoo Widows alive, on the funeral pyre of their deceased husbands, was a measure not indiscreetly or rashly adopted by the Governor-General of Bengal, but it was recommended and officially suggested to Lord William Bentinck, by the members of the Supreme Council—the judges, who are most deservedly entrusted with the power of life and death, over the millions of the Natives of India—by the Officers of the Government, holding responsible positions, and possessed of the best local information—as well as by the long-resident Europeans

of the first intelligence and unquestionable respectability ; with the exception of six individuals out of the whole British public living in India.”

The next thing Rammohun sought to remove was polygamy. He defended the legal rights of women, pointing out that women in ancient India had been allowed to learn the *Shastras*, and were entitled to equal rights and respect. He maintained that except for valid reasons no man should take a second wife while the first one was living. He asked for the protection for women from the misery to which they would be reduced in cases of polygamy. His earnestness to remove the disability that women suffered was not a little due to the influence of the West and Christian educational institutions.

CHAPTER 9

THE BRAHMO SAMAJ

THE Calcutta Unitarian Mission was not making any headway, and Adam's heart was not in it. While the services were fairly well attended, the younger Hindu members were uneasy that they might be considered to be Christians. Also there was a feeling that the place of worship should be conducted by Indians. So the Unitarian place was given up and a meeting of friends with Rammohun was held. "It was decided to open a place for non-sectarian worship of the one True God. Rammohun's rich friends made contributions and a house was rented for the meetings of the group. The first *Samaj* was opened on the 20th of August, 1825 with Tarachand Chakravarti as the secretary.

The mode of worship was similar to that adopted earlier by the Atmiya Sabha.

Brahmins recited the Vedas, texts from Upanishads were read and explained, and a sermon was read or preached. There was singing of devotional *kirtans*. The opposition to the Brahmo Samaj became stronger as it was rumoured that Rammohun was seeking to stop *suttee*, and to put down other age-old practices and customs.

Very soon enough money was raised and a building was purchased to serve as a permanent place of worship. In the middle of January 1830, only six days before the public consecration of Rammohun Roy's 'church', his enemies called a meeting of all the leading men of Calcutta, and organized a rival association called the Dharma Sabha, with a learned Brahmin as President and another as secretary. Through its newspaper, the *Samachar Chandrika* the Dharma Sabha abused the reforming party. In reply the *Sambad Kaumudi*, a weekly paper was started to deal with the charges. "The common people became participants in the conflict ; for the tracts of the reformers,

which were mostly written in the simplest Bengali, appealed to them as well as to the more educated classes. In the bathing ghats, in the market places. in public squares, in the drawing rooms of influential citizens, everywhere the rivalry between the two groups became the subject of talk.” Comic songs were composed by jesting writers in catching tunes and tags were passed from mouth to mouth.

The Trust Deed of the *Brahmo Samaj* building is worth reading carefully. “For the worship and adoration of the Eternal, Unsearchable, Immutable Being who is the Author and Preserver of the Universe...No graven image, statue or sculpture, carving or painting, or likeness of anything, shall be admitted within the building...no eating or drinking...such worship be performed daily, or at least as often as once in seven days...”

It is a matter for wonder how Rammohun found time to write such masterly treatises on so many subjects during those eventful years. The Brahmo Samaj was an attempt to refine and purify the Hindu faith. But the hostile group

dubbed it as Christianity without Christ, or the play "Hamlet, Prince of Denmark" without Hamlet. Some looked upon it as a half-way-house between Christianity and Hinduism. It was to others, neither Hindu nor Christian and therefore useless. Prof. Sarma claims that "Brahmoism roused the Hindus to work for a revival of Hinduism", and prevented conversions to Christianity,

Rammohun's "disciples" were the "living stones" which he shaped into a lasting monument. Of his relations with them we have only a few glimpses, and these are sufficient to set his work in a more genial and human light than that of the mere teacher or leader. He displayed much affection towards his followers and always addressed them as "Brothers". The Brotherhood he believed in was no mere matter of names. It was warm and demonstrative, and western in its ideals of equality and freedom.

Like many other reformers, he introduced changes in dress. He adopted the costume of the Muslims. "He directed that a closely twisted turban should be

worn instead of a loose one, and a *choga* instead of a skirt. He tried zealously to keep this style of dress in fashion." He made it a rule for himself and his disciples always to wear it while attending the Samaj. He showed in other ways his respect for the Divine Service. He always went to the Samaj on foot even though he returned in his carriage. He did not reprimand his followers in minor matters, but if the matter was sufficiently serious, he did not hesitate to speak out. If ever a disciple reproved him, he received the rebuke with great humility.

Rammohun was the first serious student of comparative religions. His interest was not merely academic or scholastic. It was mainly to fight to free himself and those about him from the fetters of Hindu orthodoxy. "He was the hero of the truest type, a great big-minded, big-souled religious reformer." No wonder he attracted as many of India's finest sons—the very cream of Bengal's intellectuals.

It may be added that in the days of his successor, Keshub Chunder Sen, the Samaj was open not only to Brahmins, but to all.

THE BRAHMO SAMAJ

In the Brahmo Samaj the caste system received its death blow from Keshub fifty years later. Several generations of distinguished sons of India have been Brahmors, for example, Rabindranath Tagore, Venkata Ratnam of Andhra and Chitta Ranjan Das.

CHAPTER 10

PIONEER OF MODERN EDUCATION

C. R. DAS proudly recalled that Rammohun “sounded the trumpet of Science at the thresh-hold of our national life”. Being a highly educated man, he felt strongly in favour of modern education along western lines. In the rivalry and dispute between the scholastic education on ancient lines in Sanskrit and scientific learning in English, Rammohun took sides and pleaded passionately for the need and “desire of educating children in the English arts, I may be fully justified in saying that two-thirds of the native population of Bengal would be exceedingly glad to see their children educated in English learning”.

Rammohun assisted in the starting of many schools and colleges, and warmly co-operated with those who were promoting institutions of higher learning. He helped

to start the Vedantic College, in which Sanskrit as well as other subjects were taught. In 1817, when the citizens of Calcutta came forward to open an English school, Rammohun along with David Hare, a liberal hearted businessman, canvassed support for the school. But when his enemies heard of his association with the project, they threatened to withhold their contributions. Rammohun immediately wrote to the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court asking him to drop his name so that the plans might go ahead smoothly. This was the Hindu College which later became Presidency College, Calcutta. Rammohun's self-effacing act made the establishment of that College possible.

The dispute between Indian-language schools and western schools which the Christian missionaries were introducing into the country, went on for a while. The East India Company tried to pacify the orthodox Hindu leaders who did not want their religion endangered by western ideas and systems, of thought, because their interest lay mainly in merchandise and money-

making. Had Rammohun not thrown his full weight on the side of the “Anglicists”. the “Orientalists” would have had their way. Rammohun maintained that Sanskrit would have only a limited usefulness, and translations of modern works into that language “must fail altogether to convey the thought of the original”. His friends and he presented a petition to Lord Amherst, criticising the Orientalist policy of education saying it was “what was known two thousand years ago with the addition of vain and empty subtleties since, produced by speculative men”. It was clear that English studies were becoming increasingly popular with thinking men. Besides, the young men at the Sanskrit College had put forward a petition to say that the knowledge they had acquired would not enable them to earn a living.

The timely arrival of Alexander Duff, a Scottish Missionary, tilted the scales against the Orientalists. Rammohun and he worked together and opened the Scottish Mission Secondary School which developed later into a college. At the same time Anderson

started a school in Madras which became famous Madras Christian College, now at Tambaram, while Wilson, another missionary, opened the equally good Wilson College in Bombay. Rammohun pleaded that the money which the government spent on education should be laid out “in employing European gentlemen of talent and education to instruct the natives of India in Mathematics, Natural Philosophy, Chemistry, Anatomy and other useful sciences, which the natives of Europe have carried to a degree of perfection that has raised them above the inhabitants of other parts of the world”.

He opposed the opening of new Sanskrit Colleges though he did support existing oriental institutions. He urged the government to start colleges which would teach western sciences and to furnish them with “the necessary books, instruments and other apparatus”. Thus we owe our present system of education to Rammohun’s interest and to the Christian missionaries who worked with him.

He helped Mr. Duff, the young

missionary, who had come in answer to his appeal to the Scottish Mission, to get a school-house on Chitore Road, in the same place which the Brahmo Samaj was on the point of leaving for their new building. He removed other difficulties from Duff's path. By personal influence among his enlightened Hindu friends, he secured their children for Duff's first pupils. On the day of opening—the 13th of July, 1830—Rammohun Roy was present from the very beginning to explain away prejudices. Duff's repetition of the Lord's Prayer in Bengali passed without remark, but a murmur arose among the pupils, when he put copies of the Gospels into their hands and bade them to read. Rammohun straightway intervened, saying. "Christians like Dr. Horace Sayman Wilson have studied the Hindu *Shastras* and you know that he has not become a Hindu. I myself have read all the Koran again and again ; and has that made me a Mussalman ? Nay, I have studied the whole Bible, and you know I am not a Christian. Why then do you fear to read it ? Read it and judge for yourselves."

This quieted the pupils; but Rammohun was careful to attend the school every day at ten when the Bible lesson was taken, for the whole of the next month and frequently afterwards—certain evidence of his determination to promote the success of Duff's work. His powerful example soon yielded results. For instance, one of his principal followers, Kalinath Ray Chaudhuri, offered buildings and appliances at Taki, forty miles from Calcutta, for a school to be supervised by Duff and taught on his lines by his teachers, who would be paid by the Chaudhuri family, for Bengali and Persian instruction. This was the beginning of a thriving mission school. Duff might well say in a letter intended to introduce Rammohun Roy to Dr. Chalmere, "He has rendered me the most valuable and efficient assistance in prosecuting some of the objects of the General Assembly's Mission."

To Rammohun the cause of education was sacred. He was always ready to place it above all narrow considerations of group, creed or sect. There are other instances of such generosity in his career as that which he showed to Dr. Duff.

CHAPTER 11

FREEDOM FOR THE PRESS

THE year 1821 marks yet another venture Rammohun made into the field of journalism. Until then he had written many tracts and books and made several translations. Now he started his own Bengali paper with a view to expressing his political views. The press at that time was under very strict control. Several American, English and Irish editors had been bundled out of the country for freely expressing their views. "Not only newspaper men but the printing press itself was suspect." The official policy in those days was to keep the people of India in a state of ignorance about affairs of government, so as to reduce the likelihood of their creating trouble. Likewise, it was felt best not to let modern learning spread, and every attempt to diffuse the light of knowledge among the

people was strongly opposed. There were a few European-owned papers printed in English like the *Indian Gezette* and the *Bengali Journal*, and Serampore missionaries published a Bengali magazine for youth, *The Digdharshan*.

A friend of Rammohun started a bi-weekly paper, *The Calcutta Journal*, which gained both Indian and European readers. Whatever public cause Rammohun was engaged in, he received the support of the editor of *The Calcutta Journal*. When Rammohun's own paper appeared, many readers were ready to give eager support. The *Sambod Kaumudi*, the Moon of Intelligence, was meant primarily to give attention to religious, moral and political matters, and "subscribers were requested to pay rupees two only". Soon after its start, its sub-editor left to begin a rival weekly, the *Samachar Chandrika*, which was the mouthpiece of orthodoxy. Rammohun also published a paper in Persian which would appeal to Muslims. "As the English language is not understood in all parts of India ... I, the humblest of the human race,

am desirous of publishing a weekly giving news in the Persian Language, which is understood by all the respectable part of the native community.”

Local news and reports of events in distant lands were given in the *Sombad Kaumudi*, in addition to topics of immediate interest, shipping and commercial items. It was a good mirror of Calcutta life of the time. Also, the relations between China and Russia, the problems of Ireland, the sufferings of peasants, the Turkish victory over the Greeks, were touched on.

Rammohun's editorials were forthright and evoked much interest. He drew parallels from conditions in other nations. When the liberty of the Press was curbed, Rammohun and Dwarkanath Tagore sent up a protest against the new rules. When that was ignored, a Memorial was submitted with the prayer that Indians might not be deprived of the “invaluable privilege”. That also was turned down.

Rammohun was encouraged to appeal to the Privy Council in England. The style and argument in his petition received high

praise in England, as being dignified in thought and diction. It was hailed as “The Areopagetica of Indian History”, because it was similar in style and spirit to Milton’s famous plea made earlier for the Freedom of the Press in England under Oliver Cromwell. After pointing out in detail the evil effects of the Press Ordinance, he ends, “the sudden deprivation of one of the most precious of their rights...a right which they are not, and cannot be charged with having abused, the inhabitants of Calcutta would be no longer justified in boasting that they are fortunately placed by Providence under the protection of the whole British nation, or that the king of England and his Lords and Commons are his legislators, and they are secure in the enjoyment of the same civil and religious privileges that every Briton is entitled to in England.”

The best British lawyers must have assisted him in drafting the Memorial. But nevertheless it bears the mark of his mind and the force of his reasoning. As Iqbal Singh puts it, “It is among the best of his English writings and has all the earnestness

and passion of a personal statement.”

He did not and could not believe that Britain had one set of standards for the freedom of the Press in England and another for her far-off colonies, like India. But though his Memorial did not meet with success, it contributed in the long run to his credit even more. Sustained by boundless faith and wonderful energy he put forth magnificent efforts for the moral, religious and political reforms of the people of his country and today we reap the rich harvest of his many-sided labours.

Another protest that he made was against the new Jury Act passed by Government in 1827. In this Act were introduced “religious distinctions into the judicial system of the country”. “Natives, Hindu or Mohammedan, are rendered by this Bill subject to judicial trial by Christians, either European or native, while Christians, including native converts, are exempted from the degradation of being tried either by a Hindu or Mussalman juror, however high he may stand in the estimation of society”. The Act denied the

honour of a seat in the grand jury to Hindus and Mohammedans even in the trial of fellow Hindu or Mussalman. Petitions signed by leading Hindus and Mohammedans were presented to both the Houses of Parliament. Note Rammohun's words : "In common with those who seem partial to the British rule from the expectation of future benefits arising out of the connection, I necessarily feel extremely grieved in often witnessing Acts and Regulations passed by Government without consulting or seeming to understand the feelings of its Indian subjects and without considering that this people have had for more than half a century the advantage of being ruled by and associated with an enlightened nation, advocates of liberty and promoters of knowledge." But it would have been very surprising indeed if the Imperial government had modified its position in response to a subject's plea, however fervent. We must look to the Indian Constitution of 1950 to see established the law of equal treatment to believers of all faiths.

CHAPTER 12

HIGH THINKING AND SIMPLE LIVING

RAMMOHUN'S was the vision of a statesman. "From personal experience, I am impressed with the conviction that the greater our intercourse with European gentlemen, the greater will be our improvement in literary, social and political affairs," he writes. He wrote many other pamphlets on public questions and in all of them he stood for "Liberty, national well-being and international unity". It was his hope that India in time, would lead the rest of the countries of Asia.

An English writer comments, "The prospect of an educated India, of an India approximating to European standards of culture, seems to have never been long absent from Rammohun's mind; and he did, however vaguely, claim in advance for his countrymen the political rights which

progress in civilization inevitably involves. Here again Rammohun stands forth as the tribune and prophet of New India.”

Now in his prime, Rammohun had organised the Hindu theistic movement. He had given permanent literary expression to the reformation of Hinduism, by selecting or indicating the order of Scriptures pointing to the one true God. He had seen the Brahmo Samaj and his pioneering services in that line were a great service to the nation. He had launched Dr. Duff's great educational enterprise. The cause of English education which he championed was now on the eve of official victory. And he had witnessed the abolition of *suttee*.

How did he live, this great thinker, reformer, writer who had achieved so much for his countrymen within one short lifetime ? Mr. G.N. Tagore whose father was an intimate friend and disciple, said that Rammohun Roy was an early riser, and regularly took his morning walk. He used to oil his body every morning before bathing. Two big men would oil and shampoo him, while at the same time he

would read every day parts of the Sanskrit grammar *Moogdhabodha*. After his bath he would have his breakfast in the Indian fashion, sitting on the ground. He usually breakfasted on fish and rice and perhaps milk, too. He never took any food between his morning and evening meal. He generally worked till two and then went out to see his European friends in the afternoon. His evening meal was between seven and eight and that was in the English fashion but the dishes were Mohammedan, like *Pilau*, *Kofta*, *Korma*, etc.

He never went out without wearing his shawl turban. When at home he always dressed in the Mohammedan fashion, *Chapkan*, *Ungage*, *Pyjamas*, and a skull cap on his head. He never sat bareheaded, following in this instance the Mohammedan custom. He never gave up his Brahmanical thread. His spoken Bengali was highly classical in structure. His English was good, but he spoke with great hesitancy lest he should commit some verbal error.

Another, slightly different account of Rammohun's typical day, based on the

account of an old and faithful servant is :

“He used to rise very early, about 4 a.m., to take coffee, and then to have his morning walk, accompanied by a few persons. He would generally return home before sunrise, and when engaged in morning duties, Gokaldas Napit (his secretary) would read to him newspapers of the day. Tea would follow, then gymnastics. After resting a little he would attend to correspondence ; then have his daily bath and eat breakfast at 10 a.m. Then he would hear newspapers read ; an hour’s siesta on the bare top of a table ; getting up he would pass his time either in conversation or in making visits. Tiffin at 3 p.m. ; dessert at 5 p.m. Evening walk ; supper at 10 p.m. He would sit up to midnight conversing with friends. He would then retire to bed again eating his favourite cake, which he called ‘Halila’. He would when engaged in writing be alone.” Truly, he lived a life of high thinking and simple living !

CHAPTER 13

VISIT TO BRITAIN

FOR more than a decade, Rammohun had been waiting for an opportunity to visit England. Even with pressing invitations from friends like John Digby and David Hare, he was unable to leave his affairs and make the sea voyage round the Cape of Good Hope, a journey of six or seven months. It is true that ships of the Chola rulers had skirted the Chinese coasts in the tenth century; but the general notion that it was neither proper nor safe for an Indian to cross the ocean still prevailed in the country. Orthodox Hindus would hardly go against such a popular prejudice. Only a brave soul like Rammohun would risk the perils and dangers of the unknown seas to fulfill his heart's desire and the purpose of his life.

The immediate reason for his going was

to present to the King of England the appeal of the Moghul Emperor, Akbar II, a pensioner of the East India Company, requesting that his status and pension should be raised to meet his needs. With this in view, Rammohun was made a *Raja* and appointed as his Envoy. However, the recognition of *Raja* was withheld, and he was not accepted by Britain as the official Envoy. But Rammohun's plan was not upset. He decided to go to England as a private individual, and in that capacity to see what he could do for Akbar II.

An Englishman writing to Jeremy Bentham, the philosopher, about the visit of Rammohun wrote, "His grand object, besides the natural one of satisfying his own laudable spirit of enquiry, has been to set a laudable example to his benighted countrymen ... The good which this excellent and extraordinary man has already effected by his writings and example cannot be told ... It is no small compliment to such a man that even a Governor General like the present who, though, a man of the most honest intentions, suspects everyone and

trusts nobody, and who knows that Rammohun greatly disapproves of many of the acts of the Government, should have shown him so much respect as to furnish him with introduction to friends of rank and political influence in England.”

Sri B. N. Banerji writing in *The Modern Review*, pointed out how “He explained his object in visiting England in a long letter addressed to the Chairman and Deputy Chairman of the East India Company, dated 25th June 1831 : “I have the honour to acquaint you that one of the principal objects of my visiting England is to lay before the British authorities, if found necessary, a representation with which I am charged from His Majesty the King of Delhi, and more especially a letter from His Majesty to the King of England, which letter it will be my duty to take an early opportunity of presenting in the event of the appeal which I am induced in the first instance to make to the Honourable Court of Directors not being attended with success.

“I would beg to state on the present

occasion that I possess full and unlimited powers from His Majesty to negotiate and agree to a final settlement of what the King considers to be his fair and equitable claims on the Honourable East India Company. The circumstances connected with the appeal are stated in a pamphlet printed for greater facility of perusal and reference.”

Other urgent thoughts on his mind related to pleading in person against the Repeal of *Suttee*. The orthodox section was seeking to prevail on the Parliament not to confirm the abolition of the practice even though a Regulation had been passed earlier by the Governor General. He was also eager to tell the people of England of the problems of his country and enlist their sympathy and support for better government and for measures that would ensure the welfare of India.

Leaving the shores of India on the 19th November 1830, little did he expect that he would be spared only three brief years for his mission in England for India. To his countrymen, his departure from India and his brief stay and sudden end in far off

England lend a legendary aura. To the earlier achievements in his own country, this meteoric end became the crown of his bright and glorious life.

CHAPTER 14

IN BRITAIN

LANDING in Liverpool, on the 8th of April, he reached London, where his fame had reached before him. Visitors thronged his hotel at all hours of day and night. Doctors had to interfere and stop persons from calling on him. Children longed to see the *Injan* with feathers around his head, but were disappointed that he was not a Red Indian, although he captured their imagination by his picturesque *pugree* (turban). The Unitarians in England gave Rammohun a special welcome, claiming him as one of their own. Dr. Bowring said, "I may add that our delight will be too great if we can in any way advance those great plans, the progress of which is the grand object of his exertions ... The members of this association feel a deep interest in the amelioration of the condition of the natives

of British India ... That our illustrious visitor from that distant region, Raja Rammohun Roy, be hereby certified of our sympathy in his arduous and philanthropic labours of our admiration for his character, of our delight in his presence among us, and of our conviction that the magnanimous and beneficent course which he has marked out for himself and hitherto consistently pursued, will entitle him to the blessings of his countrymen and of mankind as it will assuredly receive those of future generations."

The political parties — the Whigs and Tories — out did each other in honouring the him. The Lords and Commons, the Churchmen and Ministers of the Crown, all were warm in their respect. The East India Company gave a dinner in his honour, and he had an audience with His Majesty the King of England in due time. He came in contact with the best and highest in society. On invitation to give evidence before the Select Committee of the House of Commons, he put down his views on paper. He suggested the introduction of many

necessary improvements in the laws and judicial system, "the establishment in a large measure of schools and other seminaries of education for the cultivation of English language throughout the country, and for the diffusion of European arts and sciences". He pleaded for the introduction of a larger measure of self-government which would work to continue and strengthen the connection between Great Britain and India on a solid and permanent footing, provided, only the latter country be governed in a liberal manner.

The Reform Bill passed by the Parliament in 1832 gave him a thrill of the delight although it concerned only with way in which England would be governed. For many years reformers had tried to modernise Parliament, remove restrictions on voting and make it easier for ordinary persons to be elected as M.P.s, and to make the working of courts more fair to all. In the 1820s Britain was still not far from feudalism and the rule of landlords. Therefore, though the vote was not given to women for another 80 years, for its day the

Reform Bill was a triumph of liberal principles and justice and liberty. "I am now happy to find myself fully justified in congratulating you and other friends at Liverpool on the complete success of the Reform Bill, notwithstanding the violent opposition and want of political principle on the part of aristocrats ... As I publicly avowed that in the event of the Reform Bill being defeated I would renounce my connection with this country ... Thank Heaven, I can now feel proud of being one of your fellow-subjects, and heartily rejoice that I have the infinite happiness of witnessing the salvation of the nation, nay, of the whole world."

While in England (1831), Rammohun was pressed hard to give up his habits of simple living, and he rented an expensive house in Regent Street, which he retained for about three months. But his good sense soon prevailed over his folly and giving up his grand and expensive establishment, he went to live with Mr. Hare, the brother of his old Calcutta friend, David Hare, in Bedford Square. He kept a plain carriage,

with a coachman and footman in neat liveries, and adopted the style of a private gentleman of moderate fortune, although he was still courted by the first men in the kingdom. His stately figure impressed London society, and he soon became a full-fledged member of the highest circles of society there.

The India Gazette, dated Feb. 18th, 1834, says :

“Rammohun Roy surpassed the generality of his countrymen in his personal appearance almost as much as in his mental powers. In the prime of his manhood his figure was beyond common height, was stout and muscular in proportion. His countenance wore the expression of blended dignity and benevolence that charmed at first sight and put his visitors at their ease, while it checked any irreverent familiarity. In the latter part of his life which closed in his sixtieth year, his manly figure began to droop, perhaps not so much from age as the weight of thought and the toil of study. But his fine dark eye, though it lost something of its fire, retained its intelligence

and amenity to the last."

Among the many important people he met in England was Robert Owen, the father of British Socialism. Owen did his best to convert Rammohun to Socialism, but as he finally lost his temper, the Hindu was considered to have had the better of the argument ! This conversation with Robert Owen left a deep impression on Rammohun's mind. Two years later he wrote to Owen's son, Robert Dale Owen, expressing his whole-hearted approval of Owen's socialistic programme, and speaking also about the main points on which he differed with him.

Rammohun's visit to France, his audience with King Louis Phillippe and the round of engagements and visits there gave him immense pleasure. He returned to London when the abolition of *Suttee* was confirmed, and the Moghul Emperor's pension was raised substantially. Although he wanted to visit Austria and Italy, he postponed it for the time being. He needed rest, having been constantly busy with political work.

CHAPTER 15

LAST DAYS

RAMMOHUN'S three years in England form the crown and fulfilment of his life-work. They supply the dramatic completion of the half a century of service to his country and to his kind. His presence in England made the English people aware, as they had never been before, of the dignity, the culture and the piety of Indians. India became flesh and blood in him and dwelt among them in its glory. In the court of the king, in the halls of legislatures, in the select centres of fashion, in the society of philosophers and men of letters and learning, in Anglican Church and Congregational meeting places, in the privacy of many a home, and before the wondering crowds of Lancashire workmen, Rammohun stood forth as the visible and personal embodiment of the

Eastern Empire. Wherever he went, he showed how stately the "black men" could be. As he had earlier interpreted England to India, he now interpreted India to England.

"And if we glance beyond the limits of India and of the British Empire, we can hardly fail to see in Rammohun's visit a landmark in the general history of modern civilization. The West had long gone to the East. With him, the East began to come to the West."

Rammohun's impressions of the life and manners of the British people were most favourable. The opinions he had formed earlier were modified after personal contacts and close connections with so many good Christian people of different standpoints. His mixing with people belonging to different churches was warmly appreciated. He reminded Britishers that Christ was an Oriental, not a pale-faced European. He was fond of listening to well-known preachers whom he used to meet. He gave the impression of an earnest and sincere enquirer after truth. Whatever faults were mixed up with their faith and practices, he

admired the attention the followers of Christ paid to the sick and the poor, and spoke of this as the noblest spirit of Christianity.

About the closing weeks of his life there gathered many shadows. This private letter between friends of the Raja shows how his many difficulties had worried him in the evening of his life.

“Rammohun had grown stout, and looked full flushed when I saw him. It appears also that his mental anxiety contributed to increase his bodily ailment. He had become embarrassed for money, and was obliged to borrow of his friends here; in doing which he must have been exposed to much annoyance, as people in England, would as soon part with their lives as their money. Then Mr. Stanford Arnot, whom he had employed as his secretary, troubled him frequently for payment of large sums of money which he claimed as arrears of salary, and threatened, that in the event of non-payment, to do what he has done since Rammohun's death, claim as his own writing all that Rammohun published in

England. In short, Rammohun had got amongst a low, greedy, unprincipled set of people, and found out his mistake too late, which preyed upon his spirits and injured his health."

Financial trouble and worry were a misfortune from which Rammohun had never suffered before. Towards the end, his sons in India refused to send him money. This was even less excusable in the light of large pension he had managed to secure for the family from the King of Delhi. As his wealth remained in India, he could not make any use of it. He, who had until then "refrained from dining with Europeans, had of necessity to dine with the Carpenters."

He was among friends. Miss Castle, Miss Hare, sister of his Calcutta friend, David Hare, Dr. Carpenter and others were his hosts towards the end of his stay in England. It was a special joy to him to live among sincerely religious and good persons, and he felt quite at home. He kept regular hours of prayer and study.

Since his health was getting worse and London was hardly the place suitable for

regaining it, he was invited to stay in Bristol by some friends. He went there the more readily, since his adopted son, Rajaram, was being educated there. His two Hindu servants, Ram Haridas and Ramratan Mukherji, neither of whom proved to be very loyal, were with him. The ever faithful Miss Hare attended on him. Dr. Carpenter too was in Bristol at the time, and Mr. Estlin was Rammohun's medical adviser and friend. Free from the harassment of Arnot and "among friends and cultured religious people whose loyalty was beyond question", he enjoyed here enforced rest and quiet.

In the spacious mansion of Miss Castle, known as Staple Grove, he was tenderly nursed by devoted friends. He had an attack of cerebral fever, and in spite of the best medical attention, passed away on the 27th of September, 1833. With his dying breath, he muttered, 'Aum' which stands for the 'Eternal Spirit'.

So passed the soul of the great Hindu. His was a life of transition, from the time when he broke with his boyish faith and

his father's house, all through the stormy years of his manhood; and now the greatest transition of all had come. The restless and valiant seeker after truth had at last arrived and attained it. The pathos and poetry of that deathscene will linger long in the wistful imagination of India. The strange and distant western region, the rich rural landscape sleeping under the glamour of an autumnal moon, the solitary country house standing out distinct in the silvery mystery of the moonlight, everything wrapped in calm and hushed to perfect stillness, Nature and Night combining to suggest the presence of the Eternal Peace; and within, and spirit of the great emancipator struggling to burst fetters of mortality and at last achieve the freedom and peace of the mystery which he had given his life to understand.

The burial rite was utterly simple. The earthly remains were reverently lowered into the grave in the presence of a few English friends who stood in silent prayer. "Not a drum was heard, not a funeral note,

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But we left him alone with his glory." For if he had been given a Christian burial, his heirs would face difficulties in succession to the property. About a decade later, his bones were removed and placed in the shape of a Hindu Samadhi, in a graveyard on the banks of River Arno, in Bristol, at the instance of his life-long friend, Dwarkanath Tagore, grandfather of Dr. Rabindranath Tagore.

In 1872, his birth centenary, the following lines were inscribed on the stone :

"Beneath this stone rest the remains of Raja Ram Mohun Roy; A conscientious and steadfast believer in the Unity of Godhead: He consecrated his life with entire devotion to the worship of the Divine Spirit alone.

To great natural talents he united a thorough mastery of many languages. And early distinguished himself as one of the greatest scholars of his day.

"His unwearied labours to promote the social, moral and physical condition of the people of India, his earnest endeavours to suppress idolatry and the rite of Suttee,

and his constant zealous advocacy of whatever tended to advance the Glory of God and welfare of man, live in the grateful remembrance of his countrymen.”

CHAPTER 16

TRIBUTES TO LIFE AND WORK

EVEN though the prophet was not “honoured in his own country”, immediately after his death, a number of notices of the death of the great Indian prince and leader, giving generous praise, appeared in different newspapers of England. Memorial services were held in various churches—Anglican, Presbyterian and Unitarian—and sermons were preached paying high tributes to his love of truth and justice, his noble example in drawing his sword for every good cause, and to his gift of making friends in a foreign land.

A clergyman wrote, “To me he stood alone in the single majesty of, I had almost said, perfect humanity. No one in past history or in his present time ever came before my judgement clothed in such wisdom, grace and humility ... He was the

humblest of human beings, and ardent as he was in the faith of his selection he was sensibly disturbed if religion was lightly spoken of...I can only say that at every visit my admiration of him grew with my intimacy with his mind and actions. He was the most liberal, the most amiable, the most candid of men. His generosity was unbounded: his most touching politeness was an instinct of his nature, it never left him to his most familiar associates..."

The obituary was like a fanfare of trumpets announcing his deliverance from mortal coils. From his grave across the seas, he calls to his countrymen to lift their gaze beyond the horizons of their own land ... to "rid themselves of darkness and prejudice and to accept the Truth and walk the way of Truth into the ever expanding freedom and fulness of life". His many gifts of intellect, his modesty, his delicacy of feeling and courtesy towards women in particular were recalled by all.

During his life time, Miss Carpenter spoke of Rammohun as "a person of extraordinary merit. With great

intelligence and ability, he unites modesty and simplicity which win all hearts”.

Another lady who had named one of her children Rammohun, and who had made him the child's god-father, said, “For surely never was there a man of so much modesty and humility. I used to feel quite ashamed of the reverential manner in which he behaved to me. Had I been our Queen, I could not have been approached and taken leave of with more respect.”

Here is the pen porirait from the Court Journal, dated October 5, 1833:

“The Raja, in outer mien was cast in nature's finest mould; his figure was manly and robust; his carriage dignified, the forehead towering, expansive and commanding; the eyes dark, restless, full of brightness and animation, yet liquid and benevolent, and frequently glistening with a tear when affected by the deeper sensibility of the heart; the nose of Roman form and proportions; lips full and indicative of independence, the whole features deeply expressive, with a smile of soft and peculiar fascination which won irresistably the

suffrage to whom it was addressed. His manners were characterised by suavity blended with dignity, varying towards either point according to the company in which he might be placed. To ladies his politeness was marked by the most delicate manner, and his felicitous mode of paying them a compliment gained him very many admirers among the high-born beauties of Europe. In conversation with individuals of every rank and of various nations and professions, he passed with utmost ease from one language to another, suiting his remarks to each and all in excellent taste and commanding the astonishment and respect of his hearers.

“It was in argument, however, that the superiority of his mind showed best. He seemed to grasp the truth instinctively, and called in strong language, raillery, sarcasm and sometimes a most brilliant wit to aid him in getting the better of his opponent; if precedent was necessary, a remarkable retentive memory and extensive reading in many languages supplied with a copious fund; and at times with a rough, unsparing

and ruthless hand he burst asunder the meshes of sophistry, error and bigotry, in which it might be attempted to entangle him”.

A friend speaks of his natural and inherent genius, “his powerful understanding and determined will, a will determined with singular energy and unshakeable self-direction, to lofty and generous purposes.”

Of his life and work, no record is truer and no estimate more just than the following words from his English biographer, “Rammohun Roy stands in history as the living bridge over which India marches from her unmeasured past to her incalculable future. He was the arch that spanned the gulf that yawned between ancient caste and modern humanity, between superstition and science, between despotism and democracy, between immobile custom and a conservative progress, between a bewildering polytheism and a pure, if vague, theism. He was the mediator of his people, harmonising in his own person, often by means of his own solitary sufferings, the

conflicting tendencies of immemorial tradition and of inevitable enlightenment... He embodies the new spirit which arises from the compulsory mixture of races and faiths and civilizations — he embodies its freedom of enquiry, its thirst for science, its large humane sympathies, its pure and sifted ethics; along with its reverent but not uncritical regard for the past, and prudent, even timid disinclination towards revolt. But in the life of Rammohun Roy we see what we hope yet to have shown us in the progress of India, that the secret of the whole movement is religious...

“If we follow the right line of his development we shall find that he leads the way from the Orientalism of the Past, not *to*, but *through* Western culture, towards a civilization which is neither western nor eastern, but something vastly larger and nobler than both. He preserves continuity throughout, by virtue of his religion, which again supplied the motive force of his progressive movement. The Power that connected and restrained, as well as widened and impelled, was religion. Rammohun

thus presents a most instructive and inspiring study for the new India of which he is the type and pioneer... There can be little doubt that, whatever future the destinies may have in store for India, that future will be largely shaped by the life and work of Rammohun Roy—and not the future of India alone. We stand on the eve of an unprecedented intermingling of East and West. The European and Asiatic streams of human development, which have often tinged each other before, are now approaching a confluence which bids fair to form the one ocean, river of the collective progress of mankind.”

CHAPTER 17

THE LEGACY

RAMMOHUN Roy was in the beginning concerned purely with the search for Truth, but when he had found it in a purified Hinduism allied to Unitarian Christianity, he found there an imperative that he serve his fellow man. And so the rest of his life was devoted to social reform. But campaigning for the rights of women, or for modern European-style education, meant clashing with the 'religious' views of many traditional Hindus.

This only accelerated Rammohun's efforts to preach his new view of Truth. Thus the Brahmo Samaj which he founded was a grouping of persons who were equally concerned about the spiritual and material reform of the Hindu way of life.

After Rammohun's death, his Calcutta friends and especially Dwarkanath Tagore

and Devendranath Tagore and the other Samajists continued the pattern he had set of emphasizing for all people the true basis of all religion—the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man. Under Keshab Chandra Sen, the Samajists were deeply involved with social work projects including famine relief and women's education. In 1872 the Civil Marriages Act was passed, resulting from the efforts of Sen and others.

Meanwhile, in the West of India, Bombay was becoming a government and business centre, and there were to be found many gentlemen to whom the writings and example of Rammohun Roy were a call to action. A counterpart of the Brahmo Samaj, was formed in Bombay under the name Prarthana Samaj. Justice Ranade, one of the founders, also helped establish the Widow Marriage Association in 1861. Already, in 1849 efforts at caste reform in Maharashtra had commenced with the forming of the Paramhansa Sabha.

Changes had also taken place in the extent and direction of Western influence on India.

In England when the Liberals came into power in 1832, new and broad-minded ideas in politics were freely expressed from the seats of power. A concern for the welfare of the people in the colonies, in Africa and the East, including India, was voiced in Parliament. Missionary societies started schools and colleges to carry the message of Christ to the people of India, and to bring the light of knowledge to them. Ideals like “the greatest good for the greatest number” were in the air. Even East India Company’s attitude changed. From being careful not to interfere, the Company began to employ members of missionary societies as interpreters and chaplains and as unofficial ambassadors and advisers.

Growing British power all over India led to the last convulsion of the Indian feudal system—the Revolt of 1857.

The final defeat of the princes created a new situation in which only those who had understood the thinking of Rammohun Roy were able immediately to extend their bridge-building activity, linking ancient spiritual ideas with Western logic and science

and social values.

During this time, the Muslim reformer, Syed Ahmed Khan was trying to bring Islamic life under the influence of the liberal and democratic traditions of the West. In 1875 he founded the college that later became Aligarh University.

The Ramakrishna Mission (started by Swami Vivekananda in 1897), Gandhi's crusade in the 1920s and 1930s for a moral revival in India to fit her for Independence, these were further steps along the path laid out by Rammohun Roy. In his efforts to interpret the East to the West and the West to the East he had great successors—Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru.

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